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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed the extent to which writing teachers in conferencing situations employ the communication techniques used by professional helping agents. A metatheory of communication techniques developed by Allen Ivey and associates which attempts to combine and synthesize the relevant psychotherapeutic and counseling techniques in the profession was used. Using the principles of Carl Rogers, Ivey, and others, a writing conferencing communication model was developed as a criterion base for the analysis. Ten teachers (teaching K-12) were selected from around the San Francisco Bay Area who were reputed to be skilled writing conferencers and who used writing conferences frequently in their teaching. An analysis of a series of videotaped writing conferences outlines the frequency that writing teachers use the communications skills outlined in the model. The study of the interaction patterns which impede and which encourage the communication flow between teacher and student during the writing conferencing process discovers that, for the most part, teachers engaged in writing conferences do not widely use the communication skills which are defined as effective in helping relationships. (One table of data is included; 74 references are attached.) (SG)

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The Writing Teacher as Helping Agent: Communicating Effectively in the Conferencing Process

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Abstract: This study analyzes the extent to which writing teachers in conferencing situations employ the communication techniques used by professional helping agents. The article uses a metatheory of communication techniques developed by Allen Ivey and associates which attempts to combine and synthesize the relevant psychotherapeutic and counseling techniques in the profession. Using the principles of Carl Rogers, Ivey, and others, a writing conferencing communication model was developed as a criterion base for this analysis. Ten teachers were selected from around the San Francisco Bay Area who were reputed to be skilled writing conferencers and who used writing conferences frequently in their teaching. An analysis of a series of videotaped writing conferences outlines the frequency that writing teachers use the communication skills which are outlined in the model. The study of the interaction patterns which impede and which encourage the communication flow between teacher and student during the writing conferencing process discovers that, for the most part, teachers engaged in writing conferences do not widely use the communication skills which are defined as effective in helping relationships.

The Writing Teacher as Helping Agent: Communicating Effectively in the Conferencing Process

The teaching of writing has long concentrated on either the product of written assignments or more recently the process--how writers proceed with their writing efforts in organizing, reformulating, and focusing their thoughts. A critical, third dimension often overlooked is the role of an audience as responders in providing feedback to writers' efforts. We must ask ourselves--what happens when teachers and peers become helpers rather than adversaries and how can we as readers, responders and coaches communicate most effectively with writers?

A growing body of writing literature examines and supports the use of a tutorial relationship when helping students with their writing (Anson, 1989; Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1983; Harris, 1986; Nelms, 1990). Freedman (1987), in her national survey of writing response practices, found that teachers were uniformly supportive of the use of individual conferences as a way of responding to student writing. She found that students also preferred individual conferences as a way of receiving feedback about their writing. Others echo the belief that writing conferences are the most important and effective way of teaching composition (Calkins, 1986; Murray, 1985).

Although endorsements of the conferencing approach abound, it is perhaps no coincidence that little has been written about

the actual communication mechanisms or dynamics that take place when a teacher sits down with a student writer and begins to talk with her about her writing. It seems to be one of the most difficult tasks we face as teachers--to engage in a supportive, helpful, insightful dialogue with a student. In our anxiety to be helpful, we sometimes say too much and end up becoming preachy or pedantic or we don't say enough because we sometimes do not know where to begin or are afraid of putting the student on the defensive.

The helping professions have extensively documented the techniques and methods for how counselors, social workers, clergymen, substance abuse workers, physicians, nurses, and others communicate successfully with their clients. More and more, educators and other professionals are finding that the communication skills of the helping professions are ones that are universally applicable in any interactive relationship where one person seeks the help of another. Counselors and other professional helpers have spoken of the desirability of using counseling skills in contexts other than their own profession (Ivey, 1974; Kahn, 1990; Pelsma, 1987; Rogers, 1983; Rosen, 1982; Rothwell, 1984).

Spear (1978) states,

> "by emphasizing the purely personal dimension of technique, training in counseling skills would help teachers identify the strengths of their own personal

> styles and modify or develop classroom methods most complementary to them. Finally, training of this sort pulls into the teaching situation the most fundamental goal of counseling and psychotherapy--an increase in students' ability to discover, verbalize, and communicate ideas of great concern to them. Obviously this is a goal at the very heart of any composition program" (p. 374).

In addition, writing researchers, whether intentional or not, have employed some of the language and methodology of the helping professions in discussions about writing conferences. For example, Graves (1983) speaks of giving back essential information to students and rephrasing what they last said. Both Graves (1983) and Calkins (1986) discuss the importance of good questions in conferences. Murray (1982, 1985) reiterates the importance of listening to the student and starting where the latter is rather than where the teacher wishes him to be. Similarly, Madigan (1988) employs Murray's reflective listening and student-centered focus when he suggests a format for writing conferences.

Thomas and Thomas (1989) and Reigstad and McAndrew (1984) argue for a Rogerian, student-centered model of conferencing where students do much of the talking and also determine the direction of the conference. Harris (1986) discusses the writing teacher in the conferencing setting as counselor, emphasizing the

importance of listening to the whole student as he tries to make meaning. Taylor (1988) describes the specific components of a helping relationship which pertain to a writing conferencing relationship.

The helping professions have long known that how one communicates is just as important as what is communicated. The best intentioned therapist or social worker will be discounted and even dismissed as a helping agent if he or she threatens or otherwise does not help his or her client. Consequently, anyone whose professional responsibility is to help another person has learned that certain communication patterns are more effective than others.

If conferencing via the tutorial relationship remains an important way to teach writing, it would help us to examine the actual dynamics, the nature of the interaction that takes place when teacher and student sit down together and discuss the latter's writing. Little has been documented regarding how a responder can productively communicate with a writer or whether certain kinds of teacher verbalization patterns are consistent with effective helping agents' communication skills.

Murray (1982) states that it is not just a conversation we have with a writer but a conversation about a piece of work. There is a purpose, a focus to the interaction which makes it more than just a normal conversation. This same specialized interaction is what distinguishes the talk of helping agents with

their clients--counselors and other professionals communicate in a way that differs considerably from a regular, casual conversation. It is the nature of that dialogue, its unique character and ability to help other people that this article will examine.

In discussing conferencing techniques, the writing literature speaks generally of the "non-directive" approach as one way to interact with a writer (Carnicelli, 1980; Duke, 1975; Spear, 1988; Taylor, 1985; Thomas and Thomas, 1989). The term, borrowed from the helping professions, assumes that a person with the proper support and encouragement can help himself with his own academic problems or concerns. The non-directive approach believes that a competent helping agent, i.e. a teacher, can listen carefully, ask the right questions, offer encouragement and otherwise help guide the person toward what he is already capable of grasping or comprehending with appropriate support.

Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) summarize the position of many who advocate the use of the non-directive approach in the teaching of writing. They state,

> "the teacher's proper role is not to tell the student explicitly what to do but rather to serve as a sounding-board enabling the writer to see confusions in the text and encouraging the writer to explore alternatives that he or she may not have considered (p. 158)."

In short, the role of the writing teacher is that of a tutor who is an informed helper, a person with both a good grasp of promising directions toward which the student can move (the teacher remains the person who understands the standards in the field toward which the student is working) and who possesses communication techniques which help the student get there.

This study will attempt to analyze the extent to which teachers in writing conferences presently use the helping professions' communication techniques. A writing conferencing communication model was constructed, using it as a criterion base in examining communication patterns by reviewing the ideas of Carl Rogers which pertain to the non-directive approach and then applying Allen Ivey's metatheory of communication techniques in the helping professions.

Data is presented which examines the extent to which teachers in writing conferencing sessions effectively use helping agents' communication skills and discusses which interaction patterns impede or inhibit and which encourage the communication flow between teacher and student during the writing conferencing process.

Presentation of Model

Basic to the model are the Rogerian principles of realness, caring, and a deeply sensitive non-judgmental understanding of

the individual. Rogers feels that these three conditions by themselves are enough to establish substantive and lasting change. Furthermore, because these three concepts are readily understandable, many if not most people can become effective helping agents, even if they have not gone through long years of psychotherapeutic training (Meador and Rogers, 1984, p. 182). As mentioned earlier, Rogers firmly believed in the wide applicability of his concepts to fields as varied as education, business, and the ministry.

Using as a theoretical base the Rogerian concepts of empathic understanding, caringness, and genuineness, Allen Ivey and N. B. Gluckstern (1982, 1984) have created a system of microcounseling based on their metatheory of communication techniques used in the helping professions. Defining good communication practices and concepts in a helping relationship, they have broken down Rogers' three concepts into manageable and operationally definable characteristics which can be practiced, studied, and applied in practice and in real helping situations. The following format is usable in any teacher-student writing conference (Morse, 1989):

1. Basic Attending Behavior:
    a. Eye contact--look at the student from time to time but do not stare. Making "gentle" eye contact reassures the student that you are paying attention or "attending" to what he or she is saying.

b. Attentive body language--be natural and assume a comfortable body posture. A slightly forward trunk lean together with a relaxed posture most often communicates your being attentive and interested in the other person.

c. Natural use of voice--speak in a normal, friendly tone of voice.

2. The Minimal Encourage: Once the conference begins, there are a number of basic responses or minimal encourages which will prompt the student to continue talking (Gordon, 1974).

a. Silence--according to William Glasser and others, saying nothing at all, but being attentive and interested in what the person is saying, is an effective way of conveying genuine acceptance and encouragement.

b. Acknowledgement Responses--often referred to as "empathic grunting," acknowledgement responses use cues like, "I see" or "Uh-huh" and often include head nods and a variety of other nonverbal body postures or gestures which let the student know that you are listening.

c. Door Openers--these consist of a few words or short sentences which are in response to something the person said and encourages him or her to continue. Examples include, "Tell me more," "Give me an example," "That's

something I'd like to hear more about," or "How did you feel about that?"

3. Paraphrasing: Considered by many professional helping agents to be the key tool in responding effectively to an individual, paraphrasing or reflective listening involves the teacher echoing or mirroring back to the student the essence of what the teacher hears or what he thinks the student is saying.

The following is an example of a teacher paraphrasing:

Student: I keep going over and over this paragraph but the words just won't come out right.

Teacher: It sounds as if you're not having too much luck being able to say what you want to.

Student: Yeah. I keep coming up with the same words over and over.

4. Reflection of Feelings: Many students' writing efforts are both inspired and inhibited by emotions. Not only can a teacher help a student sort out facts from emotions, but helping to identify emotions is, once again, a way of showing a student that you are listening to him. In short, reflection of feelings involves a paraphrasing of a person's emotional state.

The following illustrates a teacher's mirroring of the emotional content of a student's utterance:

Student: I'm tired of working on this piece of writing. It just won't come out right.

Teacher: You seem to be saying that you are feeling a little frustrated right now on how things are turning out.

Student: That's right. I just can't come up with a good ending.

5. Open Invitation to Talk: Inviting a student to discuss his or her paper is often best achieved by a response in the form of a question. There are two kinds--open and closed. Closed questions are often factual in nature, frequently begin with "is" or "are" and can usually be answered by a simple yes or no.

Open questions often begin with "what," "how," "could" or "would." Questions beginning with "what" often lead a student to talk about the details of a situation ("What did you hear last night?"). "How" questions most often help a student to talk about process, sequence and emotions ("How did you cut yourself?" or "How do you feel about your new pet?"). Questions which begin with "Could" or "Would" tend to provide the maximum amount of room for student response ("Could you tell me more about your plans for next year?") (Ivey and Gluckstern, 1982).

Questions which begin with "Why" are usually avoided by trained helping agents because they often make students feel as if they are being interrogated. For example, "Why are

you saying that?" makes the student wonder whether there might be something wrong with his response.

6. Summarization: Often, at the end of a conference, a teacher needs to help a student pull together what took place and to restate or recapitulate the substance of the conference. Not only does a summary of the proceedings help put closure on what happened, but it helps the student draw conclusions, sort out his thoughts, and see where he has been and where he might want to go next.

Although the six points above define the basic listening and attending skills which are at the heart of any good writing conference, the ability of the teacher to help or influence a writer at times is also important. The following skills can be employed as additional tools to help a writer, either by encouraging or empathizing with her, actively intervening in the form of suggestions, or by helping her think through for herself any discrepancies, conflicts, or confusions:

7. The Positive Asset Search: The Rogerian emphasis on positive regard can often be translated into what Ivey calls "The Positive Asset Search" (Ivey and Gluckstern, 1984). Daiker (1989) states that since writing is an act of confidence the best results are likely to be produced by encouragement. To be distinguished from generic praise which is often empty or implies a judgmental stance, the

positive asset search is the identification of something positive about an aspect of the paper, the student's effort, or even about himself as a writer. The emphasis on strength and not weakness is what helps people grow (Ivey and Gluckstern, 1984, p. 13). Thus, the progress a developing writer makes frequently depends upon teacher encouragement.

8. Confrontation: Occasionally confronting students with discrepancies within their writing can help them develop a new or clearer version of their draft. For example, if a student talks about how important her grandfather is to her but never mentions it in the paper, the teacher might say, "On one hand you mention how much your grandfather means to you, but on the other you don't include it anywhere in the paper." Any clarification of possible discrepancies can help her think through more clearly what she is really trying to say.

9. Directives: Actual directives to a student can be useful but if used in excess can be a reversion to the old "search and destroy" approach to evaluating a student's paper by pointing out all the mistakes. Used judiciously, directives can be helpful to a student. She can benefit from a well-placed piece of information which relates to a writing problem or point of information, especially if the directive is objective and non-evaluative.

10. Self-Disclosure: Using self-disclosure can help a student see that the teacher has experienced or shares the same kinds of writing problems that the writer has. Self-disclosure, used in moderation and in the right context, can be a good way of helping a student see that most writers share the same problems, concerns, anxieties, and triumphs.

Procedures

In determining to what extent teachers successfully employ the communication techniques outlined above, I asked James Gray, head of the Bay Area Writing Project in San Francisco, for the names of the teacher-consultants from the San Francisco Bay Area who both conferenced with their students regularly and who were reputed to be effective writing teachers. From that list, I chose the ten writing teachers, kindergarten through twelfth grade, who agreed to be videotaped while they conferenced with their students. The make up of the student body in the schools I videotaped was generally multi-ethnic. Conferences were held with a variety of students, from remedial students in elementary school to advanced placement high school students.

With each teacher I videotaped a complete conferencing session with at least one student and then transcribed the session, analyzing and categorizing each teacher statement in terms of the ten categories of the model. With each teacher I

recorded the total number of different types of communication that took place during his or her interaction with the student. In some cases, teacher responses combined different types e.g. directives with an open question. After categorizing the entire dialogue between teacher and student, I counted the total number of communication elements and then calculated the percentage in each case of how often each category was used.

Discussion of Results

Table one presents the percentages of how frequently each teacher used the particular communication skills. The most frequent communication technique is what the model calls directives. The teachers in the study engaged in this an average of almost 30% of the time and in some cases directives were almost entirely the predominant mode for an individual conference, especially if the conference was primarily devoted to editing the student's writing for errors and other technical or mechanical points.

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In seven out of ten conferences, the teacher was clearly in control and often direct criticism or mandates were used as a way of communicating what the teacher saw as the problems with the paper. For example, teachers often said things like, "You're

using words too loosely here" or "I don't want you to erase until I tell you to." In a few cases a sharply critical or evaluative tone became paramount. For instance, one teacher described a student's efforts as "this kind of airhead stuff." Often, when the teacher had control, the conference was a monologue where the teacher did almost all the talking and the student simply listened to the teacher's prescriptions. Often, teachers, in their zeal to edit and correct, would end up focusing on little bits and pieces of the writing rather than attending to the whole piece. Frequently, a sort of "scorched earth" approach emerged with the teacher trying to deal with all the problems as he or she marched through the piece of writing.

Teachers used closed-ended questions over 20% of the time and many had a leading edge to them, i.e. the question was directing the student to the correct answer ("Do you know what comes at the end of a sentence?"). Sometimes, a kind of Socratic dialogue took place where the line of questioning led the writer to a preconceived answer already known by the teacher. Other closed-ended questions were in the multiple choice format which gave the student some preconceived choices but still no real freedom and ability to think on his or her own. Some questions probed or interrogated ("Why didn't you know you had to?") and thus became roadblocks to communication.

Paraphrasing or mirroring back what a person says was used an average of about 6% of the time by all the teachers and

minimal encourage responses occurred about 7% of the time. Thus, about 12-13% of the time teachers used reflective listening and/or at least made an attempt to acknowledge that they were listening to the student. Usually, paraphrasing occurred when the teacher tried to understand what the writer was saying and would rephrase what he or she thought the student said in order to help her clarify her thoughts. Only one teacher (number 1) used Minimal Encourage responses consistently and as an integral part of her writing conferences. She would frequently say things like, "Tell me more about that" or "That's interesting. What happened?"

Open-ended questions were used an average of about 15% of the time. Often such questions were phrased such as, "Which part do you like about your writing?" "What's another word?" "How would you close?" "What are you going to do?"

The positive asset category was applied about 14% of the time. Frequently it would come out as "That's neat" or "good" or some sort of similar generic praise. Occasionally teachers used genuinely encouraging statements or ones which were tailor-made to the student's content. Sometimes a teacher would combine a positive asset with an open-ended question or a directive in the form of a suggestion--"Your description of your dog really makes me laugh. What can we do to make it even funnier?" or "Sounds good and then if you have a page left maybe you can draw something she collects."

Summarization, self-disclosure, confrontation, and reflection of feelings were used hardly at all, less than 1% of the time.

There was not a great deal of attending behavior in evidence in about half of the teachers, especially among the teachers conferencing older students. In most cases with minimal or no attending skills the atmosphere was neutral with the teacher primarily playing the role of instructor. Often, there was no real rapport or relationship with the student. In a few cases one had the impression that the writer could have walked away from the conference without the teacher even noticing!

Conclusions

The four most frequently applied communication modes were open- and closed-ended questions, positive assets and directives which were used about 80% of the time in all the conferences observed. About 40% of the verbal responses involved teachers using skills which enhance or facilitate communication between themselves and their students. About 50% of the time teachers used directives and closed-ended questions, communication techniques which counselors and other helping professionals define as anathema to facilitative or helping relationships.

For many teachers, lecturing and closed-ended questions even in conferencing situations often continue to be the norm for how

they manage and direct student learning. Rather than use active or reflective listening (present about 6% of the time) which has been cited in the literature as an important and key strategy in all the helping professions including teaching, many of the teachers used predominantly the didactic, instructive mode of teaching. Passivity and a defined role for both teacher and student seemed to operate rather consistently in the conferences I observed. In only one conference (number 5) was there a consistent use of most of the communication skills outlined in the model.

The three teachers who were judged the most facilitative overall were the ones who consistently scored higher in the more effective communication categories and lower in those areas which are considered to impede communication. For example, teachers 1, 5, and 9 scored highest in paraphrasing and teachers 5 and 9 scored high in their use of open-ended questions. Also teachers 5 and 9 were the lowest in their use of closed-ended questions.

Teachers 1 and 9 scored high in the use of door openers/ acknowledgement responses. Similarly, the only teachers who used self-disclosure were 1 and 5. Also, except for teacher 7, the three teachers who used summarization in their conferences were 1, 5, and 9. All three teachers' use of directives was lower than the other teachers surveyed. Interestingly, the more facilitative teachers usually tended to leave the student's paper

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in front of the student, at least symbolically giving ownership of the writing to him or her.

In our examination of how teachers communicate with their students, we must ultimately ask not only what elements are present but why the ones judged effective should be used by teachers in conferencing situations. Knowledge of helping agents' communication techniques does not in itself suggest that teachers are counselors or that they will even exercise a counselor's role in a classroom, but rather such skills are ones which are universally applicable in any interactive relationship where one person seeks the help of another, whether the helper be a minister, doctor, coach, family member, or teacher.

Furthermore, such facilitative behavior promotes and supports a wide variety of positive learning and affective outcomes from increased academic achievement and higher levels of cognition to an enhanced self-concept, less absenteeism, fewer discipline problems, and a greater evidence of creativity (Rogers, 1983, p. 220).

Overall, it would appear that our rhetoric and advocacy of what should happen in one-to-one and tutorial relationships in the teaching of writing appears to outdistance the reality of what actually takes place. Although good communication techniques do occur, the more traditional methods of direct, didactic instruction, student passivity, and teacher control seem to predominate in the majority of the conferences observed.

Unless we begin to examine and apply the truly communicative and facilitative techniques we now know about in helping relationships, we shall continue to perpetuate the same kinds of instruction we are attempting to de-emphasize and even eradicate. Hopefully, a common base of communication skills will aid all of us in the helping professions to identify and use those skills which produce independent, informed, and confident learners and effective writers.

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Table 1

Analysis of Teacher Use of Communication Elements

(Percent of Use)

COMMUNICATION ELEMENTS	TEACHERS 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	MEAN
Attending Behavior	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	50.0
Door Openers/ Acknowledgement Responses	24	6	--	--	3	7	10	--	12	6	6.8
Paraphrase	17	1	2	--	7	--	2	--	14	11	5.5
Reflection of Feelings	1	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	0.2
Open-Ended Questions	10	6	8	3	27	23	8	27	28	8	14.8
Closed-Ended Questions	24	22	38	25	7	14	13	27	12	38	22.0
Summarization	3	--	--	--	4	--	2	--	2	--	1.1
Positive Assets	10	8	10	17	33	13	16	9	14	6	13.6
Confrontation	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	----
Directives	7	42	38	52	11	30	39	29	16	28	29.2
Self-Disclosure	2	--	--	--	4	--	--	--	--	--	0.6
Other	2	15	4	3	3	13	10	8	2	3	6.4

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